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UNCLAS KATHMANDU 002189

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SUBJECT: NEPAL: CABINET EXPANSION

REF: KATHMANDU 1931

1. (SBU) The interim Government of Prime Minister Lokendra Bahadur Chand announced an expansion of its 9-member Cabinet to 22 on November 18. The new names included no one from either of the two largest political parties, the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal - United Marxist Leninist (UML), and only one representative from the third largest party, the National Democratic Party, also known by its Nepali acronym RPP. The additions contain a similar mix of former supporters of the partyless Panchayat regime, members of small or new parties not represented in the previous Parliament, and technocrats apparent in the first batch of appointments on October 11. Of the 13 new names, one is a member of the lowest caste, and two are members of ethnic minorities. The Chand Cabinet now boasts 15 full ministers and 7 Assistant Ministers.

2. (SBU) A list of the new ministers follows below. (Note: Names of the Assistant Ministers will be sent septel.)

A) Ramesh Nath Pandey - Minister of Information and Communications and General Administration. A former journalist, Mr. Pandey was a minister during the Panchayat regime. He was a member of the National Assembly (the Upper House) in the previous Parliament, appointed by the King.

B) Devi Prasad Ojha - Minister of Education and Sports. Mr. Ojha left the Communist Party of Nepal - Marxist Leninist (ML) when it merged with the UML earlier this year. He is no longer affiliated with any political party.

C) Narayan Singh Pun - A retired Army officer, Col. Pun is a successful businessman who owns his own helicopter company. A Nepali Congress MP in the previous Parliament, Mr. Pun left the NC to form his own party, the Nepal Equality Party, to contest now-deferred national elections. The Nepal Equality Party platforms focuses on equal opportunity for members of all ethnic groups, castes and religion. Mr. Pun is a Magar--the ethnic group believed to constitute the bulk of Maoist foot soldiers.

D) Badri Narayan Basnet - Minister of Land Reforms and Management and Forest and Soil Conservation. Mr. Basnet is a member of the National Democratic Party's Central Committee. He had been a minister during the Panchayat era.

E) Kamal Prasad Chaulagain - Minister of Labor and Transport Management. A former member of the UML's Central Committee, Mr. Chaulagain resigned from the party just one week before being named to Chand's Cabinet.

F) Kuber Sharma - Minister of Culture, Tourism, and Civil Aviation. A former member of the Nepali Congress Central Committee, Mr. Sharma now heads his own "Green Nepal" party focusing on environmental issues.

G) Mahesh Lal Pradhan - Minister of Industry, Commerce and Supplies. A former president of the federated Nepali Chambers of Commerce, Mr. Pradhan is a businessman.

H) Deepak Gyawali - Minister of Water Resources. Mr. Gyawali is a well-respected intellectual, writer and consultant active in the field of water resources, known for his sometimes iconoclastic views.

3. (SBU) Comment: The absence of any names from the two largest parties--and the addition of only one from the Prime Minister's own RPP party--indicates that the Chand government continues to face an uphill battle in garnering mainstream political support. Without broadbased political support, the new government--despite the impeccable credentials of some of its appointees--may find the task of governing increasingly difficult.

MALINOWSKI